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What's the use of on-line work based learning? Reflections on difficulties with reference to the University of Chester's Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) programme

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Introduction

The paper reviews the operation of one of the most flexible and innovative programmes in UK Higher Education and in particular its delivery through dedicated Virtual Learning Environments. While there are many successful aspects to the programme, the purpose here is to openly address some of its more problematic aspects and discuss ways to overcome them.

Although the context for discussion is work based e learning, the title borrows from Donald Bligh's (1998) famous interrogation of lectures.

This brief paper accompanies the presentation and is designed to enable me to share aloud some of my thoughts and concerns. After a description of the WBIS framework and its intranet delivery, I will consider the following four issues:

- The implications for employer involvement in programme design and the learners' experience
- The tension between technological and educational imperatives
- Progression and completion rates
- The assumption of knowledge transfer

The WBIS framework

The Work Based and integrative Studies (WBIS) framework developed at the University of Chester is a pre-validated degree framework designed to facilitate learning for people in the workplace and provide academic credit for it.

The WBIS programme has been in existence since 1998 and is informed by situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991). Within Fuller and Unwin's (2002) five models of work based learning, it can perform in a variety of roles but it is principally designed to bring formal instruction to social learning in the work place as the basis for reflective practice.

WBIS programmes are tailored to the needs of either individual learners or those of an employing organisation. Learners, provided they meet standard academic entry criteria, determine not only the content of their programme but also the award they obtain. They can opt for a Higher Education Certificate, Foundation Degree/Diploma, Degree, Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma or Masters. The title of their programme reflects their preference and the content of the programme.

Learners on the programme can study modules which have been developed specifically for WBIS or any module in the University, provided it is relevant and at the appropriate level. Individual learning needs can be catered for through the use of project modules or, if there is sufficient demand, new modules are developed on request. There is a rolling programme of module accreditation to accommodate changing requirements. We can adapt to the needs of new learners without the need for time consuming validations.

A fundamental aspect of the programme is therefore that it is demand led. We do not determine the content of the learners programme: the learner does. Our role is to facilitate and assist the learning process and translate it into formal academic credit bearing qualifications.

Another distinctive feature of the WBIS approach is the intimate connection with workplace practice. In a typical WBIS module, the learner is introduced to a body of theory and wider literature and then asked to interrogate their practice. From the learners perspective the relationship with theory becomes much more immediate than is the case on conventional programmes. They select those theories/models which are relevant to their needs and use this as the basis for an internal dialogue, based upon their own practice and that of colleagues. This requires a degree of sensitisation to formal, reflective practice which is usually embedded at the start of most programmes. In this way learners are encouraged to reflect upon their current practice as a means of improving performance.

WBIS is a hugely flexible programme with innumerable individual and employer determined pathways. The educational philosophy underpinning the programme can be summarised as follows:

- To bridge the divide between knowledge located in higher education and that in 'real life', specifically the work place so that both are informed by one another
- Enable individuals to engage with lifelong learning by sensitising them to their learning needs and preferred methods of learning.
- To place the learner and their needs at the centre of the learning process
- To provide low cost flexible education that recognises the profoundly social nature of the learning process

- To value knowledge from all sources including that of learners and recognise that we as facilitators learn from them as well as they from us
- To enable individuals to capture their informal, practical experience and reflect on that experience in the light of more formal theoretical knowledge
- In effect, WBIS attempts to encourage internal dialogue in the learner between informal and formal knowledge as the basis for altered action. It therefore seeks to transform individuals and organisations

There are currently about 1,000 learners on the WBIS programme, the majority of whom work in the public sector. Some of these are on individually determined pathways, funded by employers whilst others are on pathways where there is considerable employer input into pathway design. An example of this is the Foundation Degree developed for the Civil Service. More recently WBIS has been used by defined occupational groups, such as regeneration professionals.

WBIS and e learning

For most learners on the programme there has always been a strong emphasis on personal learning, supplemented by tutorials, workshops and formal lectures- traditional face to face higher education delivery. The result is that learners have been recruited mostly on the basis of geographical proximity to the University.

In recent years the pattern of provision has changed in response to technological development and employer demand. In particular, some employers have been reluctant to sanction attendance at the kind of events described above and have instead required learners whom they are funding to find means of learning which they believe involve less time away from the job. We have also been approached by employers with learners in many locations around the country for whom attendance at University events is simply impractical.

These changes in demand have coincided with the development of e-learning technologies. Some of the newer pathways (including Foundation Degrees) within the WBIS programme are delivered almost exclusively through dedicated pathway Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). The VLEs enable learners to access a lot of learning material, as well as submit assignments electronically and join on-line discussions.

This has proved popular with employers and learners. As a result, we are creating a WBIS Portal with suite of modules and other learning resources to which all WBIS students in future will have access through pathway bespoke VLEs. No formal decisions have been taken in respect of the mix of e learning with more traditional modes but it is assumed that in future, there is likely to be more of the former and perhaps less of the latter. As Bates (2005) has

noted, the literature on-work based and e-learning tends to be separated but for us the boundaries are blurred.

Issues for discussion

The WBIS framework and for those learners on e-based versions of it, is highly successful. This is evidenced in a number of ways, not least in the comments of stakeholders, including externals. As yet there is no comprehensive evaluation although it is anticipated that a preliminary study will take place later in the year. The programme is robust and the addition of e-learning has further augmented its application.

What I want to do in this paper is explore some of the more difficult issues in respect of the programme. The reason for is that there is a feeling that the sort of learning we are engaged in is likely to feature more heavily in the Higher Education landscape in future and while we recognise the benefits of such an approach, we are not blind to some of the difficulties. We are anxious to share experiences with other practitioners to help us resolve some of the problems we face, especially in respect of the four issues I have chosen to highlight and which we think, require further research. The list is by no means exhaustive and practitioners may regard other issues (such as assessment and the administrative and cultural implications of having work based learning in an otherwise conventional university, for example) as equally important.

The implications of employer involvement

Employers have been involved in work based learning programmes for many years at Chester and elsewhere. However, the development of Foundation Degrees and the implications of the Leitch report (HM Treasury 2006) is likely to result in far greater levels of employer engagement in programmes than we have seen in the past. Some practitioners welcome this whilst recognising there are many challenges as a result (Morgan et al 2004; Edmond, Hillier and Price 2007). I will briefly outline some of those discussed in the literature before adding some more of my own, based on experience at Chester.

First is the issue of persuading employers to engage in Higher Education at all (Keep 2003, quoted in Edmond et al 2007). The consequences of persuading employers to engage underpins many of the observations I will make because keeping them on board is by no means easy. Employers are simply more powerful than undergraduates and unlike them, they have options besides HE.

At one level, attracting employers is not a problem and the WBIS programme has been very successful in attracting and retaining them. The programme is hugely flexible and can adapt to their needs. Learners can more or less begin and end when they want and employers can specify what is learned.

¹ To quote the 2006/7 HE funding settlement letter (31.1.06) from the then Minister Ruth Kelly: "The first (priority) is to lead radical changes in the provision of higher education in this country by incentivising and funding provision which is partly or wholly designed, funded or provided by employers"

But there are important caveats. The majority of our clients are in the public sector where there is a desire to invest in work place education. We have been less successful at attracting the private sector and it might be that outside the corporate sector, there is relatively little demand from private employers.

The terms and conditions we offer are also highly favourable. HE is very cheap compared with private training providers and the terms are very favourable. To retain employers we only charge for completed modules, unlike on a conventional programme where there is a much greater financial commitment by the learner.

The overwhelming majority of our relationships with employers have been good but not all of them have been plain sailing. Maintaining a good relationship sometimes requires diplomatic skills I wish I possessed. For academics, used to freely expressing thoughts and opinions, the demands of dealing with employers can be challenging.

Other issues (Hillier and Rawnsley (2006) cited in Edmond et al 2007) include the variability of the student experience; differing levels of employer engagement; differing relationships with employers and differing perspectives on education between HE providers and employers.

A distinction can be made between employers who allow employees to negotiate their own programme and those who wish to specify a programme. The former, from the perspective of the University, are relatively easy to deal with. The latter are a different proposition and the following comments are based on experience with them:

- It is not always easy to find out what employers want from a programme. This might sound counter-intuitive but it is often extremely difficult to tease this out. This is especially difficult with large employers who have several autonomous divisions. In our experience employers without their own programme have to have something put in front of them, rather than come to us with clear ideas
- There are often profound differences (often unexpressed) in objectives and the understanding of terms. For many employers, the title/ accreditation may be more important than the educational objectives. For example, we aim to encourage critical thinking. But we may keep quiet about it because we know some employers prefer compliant thinking. Similarly we have gradually come to realise that for some employers 'work based learning' means 'learning on the job' and that 'education' means 'giving information'. Employers as a group are

extremely heterogeneous, even within the same organisation and have a variety of objectives and understandings.

- Most surprising of all to us is the often apparent lack of interest some employers have in the enhanced capacity of learners who clearly benefit from the process. This is especially an issue on Foundation Degrees, where the final award is unclassified. Some learners respond to this by aiming to pass with minimal engagement, whereas the majority (I am glad to say) take their performance seriously but feel their engagement is not matched by the employers' evaluation of their capacity.
- There have been difficulties with some employers in terms of delivery of numbers promised or even in one case, the blurring of ownership issues. There have been examples of the University's logo 'disappearing' on recruitment material, for example.
- The differential learner experience on employer led programmes has already been noted but there is a further issue in respect of learner representation. For conventional programmes, the election of 'student reps' is an accepted and relatively unproblematic part of programme management. This is not the case where employers feel they 'own' the programme and it is difficult to organise elections. Instead we have had instances of 'appointed' student reps, leading to suspicion on the part of others as to their independence.
- Price sensitivity is an issue we constantly grapple with. We have already noted that HE is often far cheaper than private sector alternatives but employers are sensitive to price increases, such as those brought about by higher charges for undergraduate programmes for example. When money is tight for employers, the training budget is often an easy target. As a result, we charge less for our work based learning modules than conventional modules in the rest of the University, even where a learner as part of their WBIS studies, opts to take a conventional module.

Educational and technological imperatives

One of the most attractive features of WBIS to employers and learners is the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) because it enables access to information pretty much whenever it is needed. In fact, the development of the first VLE was paid for by an employer and we have been cloning and refining it ever since. It sits on our own internal platform (IBIS) so adapting to meet changing requirements is relatively easy

There have been constant technical improvements so that there are now, unlike initially, facilities for informal chat, personal and group blogs and so on, in an attempt to facilitate communication and hence peer learning. Most of these additions have come from learning technologists rather than being demanded by either learners or tutors and we are slightly concerned that these developments may be more technologically than educationally driven.

In other areas, where we (the tutors) would like technical changes, we have been unable to bring change about. Our VLEs are pretty state of the art but they are not always visually appealing, are very text oriented and not hugely interactive. Our attempts to create a more multi-media approach have met with resistance from the technologists who, lacking the skills themselves, may have felt threatened.

On e-learning programmes, the electronic capability of other parts of the University are also important, especially the Library. As tutors we feel their pages are not very user friendly, especially in respect of journals but again, we have been unable to bring about change.

In common with most distance e-learning programmes, we are concerned about the levels of interaction between learners and between learners and tutors. To overcome this a number of programmes attempt to encourage on-line dialogue by including it as part of the assessment process (Johnson and Dixon 2006). WBIS tutors have not gone down this route because of a shared view that the technology can assist in certain key educational tasks, notably providing information, but it is less well suited to changing attitudes, inspiring interest, facilitating personal and social interest and teaching behavioural skills.

The solution for many of these difficulties we believe lies outside the domain of e-learning. For example, the most effective means of promoting thought, inspiring interest and changing attitudes is discussion and face to face dialogue (Bloom 1953). On programmes where tutors have control and where there are not the same constraints, it is acknowledged that a 'blended' approach, employing a variety of learning methods and experiences, in addition to e-learning, is likely to produce a more satisfactory learning experience (Elliot 2002; Singh 2003).

Our feeling is that the presence of the technology can have a distorting effect on effective delivery. For example, a lack of engagement is 'solved' by a new blog facility; lack of progression is 'solved' by automatic tracking of submissions and so on. Pressure for 'technical fixes' comes from a variety of sources; educational technologists who may be unconsciously projecting their own learning preferences onto others and employers looking for solutions involving minimal time investment. Employers who understand education to mean 'information transfer' may not even recognise the need for face to face contact. Sometimes I think some even e-learning texts conspire against what should be good practice; many I have seen have a marked enthusiasm for technological over learning imperatives.

One of the lessons we have learned is that involving others in the educational process, such as employers and learning technologists results in tutors having less control over the education process. In some respects this may be in the interests of learners but there are frustrations on the part of learners and tutors on some pathways at the lack of contact.

Progression and completion

Progression and completion rates on distance programmes are lower than on conventional programmes and we are no exception (Greenagel 2002). I have heard various figures bandied about for completion but the rates are certainly very low and if we want to see more WBIS type programmes in future, this must be a priority.

I have already alluded to the natural desire of employers to see minimal time away from the job, resulting in (from a tutor's perspective) an over-reliance on e-learning methods and this may certainly contribute to slow progress. We know that a more 'blended' approach (involving more face to face delivery) not only has greater educational value but also improves progression and completion (Elliot 2002; Garrison and Cleveland Innes 2003; Garrison and Kanuaka 2004; Singh 2003; Williams 2002).

We also know that access to learning time in the workplace is an important factor in progression (Billet 2004). Similarly, the support of line managers is important (Allen and Lewis 2006). We also know that progression is a function of individual motivation, mediated by the degree to which the work environment is supportive of learning (Fuller and Unwin 2004) and is unaffected by gender or preferred learning style (Walsh et al 2003). More recently Bryson et al (2006) have demonstrated that access to learning time is mediated by status in the organisation.

All of these findings from research are borne out by our experience. Beyond this there are major gaps in our knowledge. We do not know much about the effect of workplace cohorts (as opposed to individual participation) on progression or whether mentors are also an important factor. We know from experience that disruption in the workplace (such as change of role) and life events (divorce, bereavement and so on) also affects many of our learners.

All of these factors are mediated by personal motivation and we have some learners who seem able to overcome huge obstacles. Against this, there are others who never even really start. Whilst we see the need for much more research in this area, we also recognise that in part, the solutions are in our own hands.

We know from experience that we can increase motivation by imposing deadlines and reminders of them. We can also increase motivation by

personal contact and responding positively to requests. An important part of our role is to provide formative assessment and we are all conscious as tutors of the need to balance constructive criticism with more positive messages. Where we have had less success is in persuading employers that progression is an issue for them too. For at least some, there is a belief they are purchasing something and if progression is an issue, it is one for us and not them. The irony is that they can have great influence on progression by rewarding diligence and punishing slow progress. The arrangement whereby employers only pay for completed modules, so no financial penalty is incurred for non-completion, conspires against this. But this is a necessary arrangement to induce them on to the programme in the first place.

The assumption of knowledge transfer

The final issue I want to raise is ultimately the most important- the assumption that completion of a pathway within the WBIS programme or any other work based learning programme leads to enhanced individual and hence organisational capacity- knowledge transfer. Advocates of work based learning routinely assume that such capacity enhancement occurs but there is not much empirical evidence to support this contention (Nixon et al 2006).

The origin of these ideas goes back to the early 1960s and in particular, the work of Schultz (1963) and Becker (1964)

Schultz, an agricultural economist, was interested in raising agricultural output. The solution to improved yields was not so much greater investment in fertilisers and farm machinery but in educating farmers to better exploit technical progress. Schultz then extended his approach to demonstrate that the yield on investment in people across all sectors was greater than the returns from investment in physical capital such as new plant and machinery.

Becker extended Schultz's analysis to demonstrate that public investment in education and even health care could be regarded as investments in human capital. More recently Lucas (1988) has demonstrated how the accumulation of human capital is facilitated by both formal education and learning by doing. Barro and Sala I Martin (2004) have produced strong empirical evidence on the positive effect on economies of spending on education.

While human growth theory appears to offer insights into how education can facilitate broader social change, the theory is extremely broad brush. There is little reason to believe that all education for all individuals benefits all organisations they work for in all circumstances. To begin with, not all individuals learn equally well. Nelson and Phelps (1966) drew attention to the limitations of peoples' ability to learn- that is the stock of human capital is not equally distributed.

It might also be the case that organisations have differing ability to learn. Lynch et al (2006) conducted an evaluation on the impact of a work based learning programme on middle managers in a manufacturing company. Although the majority of respondents thought of the training they had received in positive terms, equal numbers reported knowledge transfer to the workplace 'easy' or 'difficult'. Impediments to transfer were related either to a lack of time or cultural issues. Further investigation revealed that 'cultural receptivity' varied widely even within a single company, although overall there were identifiable benefits, not just to the individual.

There are very few studies of this type and although the findings are on the whole positive, we need many more of them. Many learners on the WBIS programme are not part of a large cohort of learners (as in the Lynch study) but are often isolated or may be paying for themselves due to a lack of organisational support. There may well be a lack of receptivity in organisations. Indeed, as noted, one of the surprising characteristics of some employers is the lack of interest in what people learn and how it can contribute to organisational goals.

Concluding thoughts

Although the issues raised here are intended to provoke discussion and the sharing of experiences, they are by no means the only issues worthy of discussion in the context of work based learning and e-learning. I have not discussed some of the more familiar pedagogical issues mainly because these issues are more frequently aired in the literature.

My personal interest is in the impact on individuals and organisations, especially longer term. I am also keen to hear of others' experiences and ideas.

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